

God's Will
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I Timothy 2:1-7

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Kate Bowler teaches at Duke Divinity School and wrote a book several years ago about her diagnosis with stage 4 cancer called *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I Have Loved*. In her book she tells the story of a well-meaning neighbor who came to her front door to express sympathy and support after her cancer diagnosis. Her husband answered the door and after the neighbor offered sympathies, the neighbor ended the conversation by saying something like, 'well, everything happens for a reason.' Bowler's husband responded, not with a sympathetic affirmation, but with an invitation for further conversation. 'I'd love to hear it,' her husband replied. 'Pardon?' the neighbor said, startled by the reply. 'I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying,' he replied, in Bowler's words, 'in that sweet and sour way he has.' Bowler continues: 'my neighbor wasn't trying to sell [my husband] a spiritual guarantee. But there was a reason she wanted to fill that silence around why some people die young and others grow old and fussy about their lawns. She wanted some kind of order behind this chaos.' Because the opposite of 'everything happens for a reason' is inexplicably leaving a husband and small child behind, and Bowler reminds us that we can't let ourselves say: 'wow. That's awful.' There has to be a reason, because without one we are left as helpless and possibly as unlucky as everyone else.¹

In my first congregation, there was a sweet older member of the church who would come to the church heading into the weekend and make sure the church looked good going into Sunday. We would always briefly cover the goings on in the community, and if someone had died she would always shake her head and remark, 'you just never know, it was just God's will.' Like Kate Bowler's neighbor, she was just trying to make sense of her world and not make a definite theological statement about God or a judgment about why some of us suffer some challenging afflictions at various points in life and others seem to be fortunate to live long and prosper unscathed from such tests. We cannot really explain it so 'everything happens for a reason' or 'it is just God's Will' will have to do in a pinch, though I don't think any of us are real comfortable believing that it is God's will that some people suffer because of their skin color or others killed in a car crash lose their lives because in that moment God need another angel or because everything that happens in our lives or in this world or in all times and places, happens for a reason. Kate Bowler continues: 'the only thing worse than saying 'everything happens for a reason' is pretending that you know the reason. I've had hundreds of people tell me the reason for

¹ Kate Bowler, 'Death, the Prosperity Gospel and Me,' in *The New York Times*, February 13, 2016.

my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. No one is short of reasons.... when someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.² I guess it was just God's Will.

On the topic of God's will, I have always wondered why God doesn't care about defense. Everyone who gets into the endzone always attributes the game winning score to the will of God, but nobody who plays defense ever does. Only touchdowns are God's Will, I guess. There is a two-panel cartoon I have seen that on side shows a player in the endzone thanking God for the touchdown and on the other side shows God sitting in a recliner on a cloud watching a game, but God is watching hockey. Some of the meanest, foul-mouthed, ungodly people I have ever met I met on the seminary flag football field and I am including myself in that number. Before every game, we would start with a prayer and then these serene pious polite seminary students would start acting like the biggest jerks and maniacs you have ever seen with absolutely nothing at stake. I don't know if it was pent-up emotion or people trying to spend all week being good and godly, but on Saturday it all got let out and let my memory is good enough to remember some things said that should not have been said and some things done that ought not to have been done. If this tells you anything, I was never asked by the referees to offer the prayer before our games, but if I had been, here is what I think I should have prayed... 'God, you have a lot bigger things in our world to deal with right now than our seminary flag football game...war between Ukraine and Russia, the degradation of our country's institutions and the public trust, economic worries, anxiety about the future, the challenges of immigration and poverty, so forgive us for thinking you care all that much about transpires here, forgive us for acting more passionately about the outcome of this game than we do about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly in service to you, forgive us for losing our minds because of an obvious pass interference call was missed. It is not that you are indifferent to us, O God, but help us to see that your providential will goes way beyond our team's aspirations and our searches for a good parking spot, but that it often appears to look like failure and humiliation in sacrificial service, and it renders outcomes that will never be visible for all to see, except by your wisdom and grace. Amen.'

The familiar hymn, 'I Sing the Mighty Power of God,' begins in the third verse with this line: 'There is not a plant or flower below but makes God's glories known,' and we also hold with us a sense that God's will is not an arbitrary and capricious power, rewarding some and punishing others, but that God's will, mercy, beauty, and abundant life are poured into all creation. Our passage today from I Timothy includes instructions by Paul for prayer and worship, and is a reminder that our prayers are not to be just for

² Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason*, 170.

ourselves and our own needs but for the sake of the world and extend to the universal. And then we get to verse 4, which is perhaps one of the most clear and straightforward declarations of God's will in all of scripture. Here is what Paul says: 'God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth.' That is God's Will. Even when things seem arbitrary and unfair diseases threaten, God desires everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of truth. Even when life has gone turbulent, and it would be easier to chalk everything up to randomness and fate and fortune, God desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. Even when we seem to be on an island, in our beliefs and practices, in our attempt to live out the faith, in the randomness and arbitrariness and unforgiving-ness of our world, Paul tells us that the will of God is that all be saved and come to knowledge of truth, that life and history, even when it seems random or substantial or noteworthy, is goal oriented and that God's will has its way ultimately, and that it is not a random will or an arbitrary will or a completely unpredictable will, but that there is not a plant or flower below, much less people like you and me, who have not been created to flourish on this earth and reflect God's glory. That is God's will for you and for me and for all creation.

Our passage ends with an expression of the fulfillment of God's will in the person of Jesus Christ, as Paul writes here, 'the one mediator between God and humankind, who became fully human, and who gave himself a ransom for all.' Ultimately God's will is not an abstract or unexplainable phenomenon at all but comes to fullness in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of God's will in this world and in our lives, so much so that as Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance reminds us, God loves us so utterly and completely that he has given himself to us so fully and completely in Jesus Christ that 'Jesus Christ died precisely because we are sinful and utterly unworthy of him, and has thereby already made us his own before and apart from our ever believing in him. He has bound us to himself by his love in a way that he will never let us go, for even if we refuse him and [try to] damn ourselves to hell his love will never cease...' As the one mediator between God and humanity, Torrance continues, Christ has done this not only as God but also in our humanity...'from beginning to end, he has acted in our place in the whole range of our human life and activity, including our personal decisions, and our responses to God's love, even our acts of faith. He has believed for us, fulfilled our human response to God, so that Christ already acknowledges us before God as one who has responded to God faithfully, one who has already believed in God, and followed God faithfully, who life is already implicated in Christ's self-offering to the Father, 'in all of which he has been fully and completely accepted by the Father, so that in Jesus Christ we are already accepted by God.'³ Torrance encourages us that we do not need to live our lives with the anxiety that we have not done enough or worry that our faith is adequate

³ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 94.

enough, for it is not the strength of our 'personal' faith that we rely, but 'solely upon what Jesus Christ has done for us, in our place and on our behalf,' and that is the will of God.⁴ Over and over again, the will of God, is the movement of Christ to take our place in order to give us his place, to live in this world free of fear and free of chasing a reward or looking over our shoulder for a penalty, but instead being moved to look to Christ and Christ's faithfulness to us.

Let's be honest, our world often runs to the beat of a different will. So do our lives. A study that took place this year, says that 2/3 of Americans cannot sleep because of anxieties about the future of the world. War drums beat. The tyranny of the calendar overtakes. The challenges of race, relationships, crime, and our social fabric persist. Is it all God's will? All the brokenness, all the sleepless anxiety, all the racial epithets, all the senseless acts of rage and violence? Obviously not, but running parallel to all those tracks, weaving its way through all those fraying fabrics, threading its way to keep us knit together, embedding itself into all of that, is the will of God, which Paul tells us, 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth.' One way or another, Paul tells us, Christ will find a way to become Lord and sow the seeds of his kingdom and enact his will. He has done it even as he accepted death and humiliation on the edge of town. He has done it even while watching his disciples desert and flail. He has done it by loving us into being, calling us by name, and claiming us as his disciples in this world, even when we weren't sure we were up to the task. He has done it by standing in our place, believing for us, and giving us courage when we have not been up to the task. And he will continue to form a community, to create reconciliation and justice out of nothing, to transform lives by the power of his gospel, and desire all to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. That is God's will. May we always live with the confidence and courage that in every circumstance, in every age, and every instance, God's will for us in Jesus Christ will come to reign, one way or another. Amen.

⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 95.